

VZCZCXRO1771

RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLH RUEHLD RUEHLZ

RUEHPW RUEHROV RUEHVK RUEHYG

DE RUEHAB #0492 1091207

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

R 181207Z APR 08

FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0633

INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUEHB/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1471

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 3653

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1338

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1907

RHEHN/NSC WASHDC

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2426

RHMFIU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

UNCLAS ASHGABAT 000492

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KIRF SOCI TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: AHAL PROVINCE PASTOR OPTIMISTIC AS CHURCH
AWAIT REGISTRATION

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) During a visit to cities in Ahal province to the west of Ashgabat, PAO met with the pastor of the Light of Life Christian Church's branch in Abadan city. The Abadan branch of the church applied for registration as a religious group in January 2007 and has received two replies requiring adjustments to their application.

Despite the lengthy process, Pastor Ruslan Atajanov and his small congregation are optimistic about receiving the registration and about the direction of changes in Turkmenistan in general.

HOPE FOR REGISTRATION

¶3. (SBU) Noting that the Dashoguz and Turkmenabat branches of the church have already received registration, Pastor Atajanov believed that it was only a matter of time before the Abadan branch did. Over the last several months, the church received feedback from the Ministry of Justice on its application. Both times, only technical aspects of the application needed correction. He did not view these as merely an excuse to delay registration, and quickly corrected and resubmitted the needed documents.

BUT DIFFICULTIES ALONG THE WAY

¶4. (SBU) He described the church's registration process as troubling, because prior to their January 2007 submission for registration, they had operated quietly, and without any government interference. Almost immediately after submission of their registration documentation, government authorities started to visit his apartment, sometimes searching his belongings, and told the group not to hold any gatherings until registration was approved. In effect, he said, a religious group has to cease its activity while the registration is pending. He explained that despite this, his small congregation of ten persons still managed to meet quietly without having their services or gatherings disrupted. Pastor Atajanov also expressed his view that government officials simply fear the instability, often associated with religious strife, seen in other countries. He sympathized with this fear, but believed that the church's sincerity and peaceful activity would eventually show them there is nothing to fear.

OVERALL OPTIMISM

¶5. (SBU) Pastor Atajanov's optimism extends to Turkmenistan's future under President Berdimuhamedov. He noted that church members generally believe that life has improved in the past year of slow, but positive reform. In particular, he noted the lifting of travel bans and highway check-points as evidence of this. The only complaint about the reforms, he reported, was that they should move faster.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: His observation that life has improved following the change in leadership is important to note. That reforms have been perceptible to residents of rural Ahal means that they do seem to be reaching rural residents. We will periodically check with Pastor Atajanov to see how the registration process is progressing.
END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND